

Dominik Hašek vs. the NHL: Why a legendary goalie shunned the Global Series spotlight



By Matthew Fairburn 7h ago

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PRAGUE — The [NHL opened its regular season](#) in Prague last week with two Global Series games between the [Buffalo Sabres](#) and [New Jersey Devils](#). Czech hockey legends were prominently featured. Jaromir Jagr dropped the ceremonial first puck ahead of the game on Friday. Patrik Eliáš, the Devils' all-time leading scorer, was around the team all week and dropped the puck for the second game of the series.

But one Czech hockey great was notably absent. Dominik Hašek, the Hall of Fame goalie who helped lead the Czechs to an Olympic gold medal in 1998 and one of the greatest players in Sabres franchise history, did not attend the games or participate in any promotional materials in the lead-up to the games. Last Thursday, Hašek released a statement on his X account condemning the NHL for allowing Russian players to play in the league while Vladimir Putin continues Russia's invasion of Ukraine. On Friday afternoon, hours before Jagr dropped that ceremonial first puck, Hašek met with *The Athletic* to discuss his ongoing issue with the NHL.



“My motivation is huge,” Hašek said. “I consider everything I do on this topic to be vitally important. What is happening now in Russia, that is, the Russian imperialist war in Ukraine and other crimes connected with it, is very similar to what Hitler did in the 1930s. And we all know how that turned out. This must not happen again. And that is why I am trying to publicly explain to people all over the world what is important and how to act so that the Russian war of aggression does not spread and ends as soon as possible. And of course, the main motivation is saving human lives. For me, human life always comes first.”

Russia escalated the war between the two nations in February 2022 when it launched a full-scale invasion of Ukraine. That month, the NHL released a statement condemning Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and announcing it had suspended relationships with partners in Russia. Hašek has made his feelings clear since the day Russia invaded. He wrote an email to NHL commissioner Gary Bettman and said he got only a brief response. In the years since, Hašek said the league has made no effort to have a dialogue with him. The NHL declined to comment for this story.

During that time, Hašek has called for the NHL to pay billions of dollars to Ukraine as compensation and was outspoken about Russian athletes [being allowed to participate](#) in the [Olympics](#). Russians participating in the NHL serves as an advertisement for what the country is doing and improves morale in Russia, he says.

Hašek also ran for senator in Czechia this year. In September, Hašek failed to advance past the first round of voting. He’s taking the downtime to determine his next step, but he wants to stay involved in politics.

It wasn’t until 1989, when Hašek was 24, that the Czech Republic became separate from the Soviet Union. Hašek is intimately familiar with life under authoritarian rule. He doesn’t want his children to know what that’s like. Hašek has a soon-to-be 3-year-old son, Honza, with his current partner, and two adult children, Michael and Dominika, with his ex-wife. Hašek returned to the Czech Republic after retiring from the [Detroit Red Wings](#) to raise his children in his home country.

Hašek also played the final year of his career in the KHL back in 2010-11. Putin has been either the prime minister or president of Russia since 1999, making him the longest-serving Russian leader since Joseph Stalin.

But while Hašek majored in history in college, he didn’t become interested in politics until after his playing career ended. He has since become more outspoken on certain issues, including this one.

Many in Czechia share Hašek's [fears](#) and views, and for hockey fans, it extends beyond the NHL. In 2023, Rytíři Kladno, the Czech Extraliga team owned by Jaromir Jagr, signed goalie Julius Hudacek, who was born in Slovakia but had spent the previous season playing for a Kazakhstan-based team in the KHL. Fans threatened to protest games, and Kladno released Hudacek days later.

This is the second time the NHL has come to Prague since Russia invaded Ukraine. The [San Jose Sharks](#) and [Nashville Predators](#) played here in 2022, and each team had a Russian player on its roster. While neither the Devils nor the Sabres brought a Russian to the Global Series, Hašek still didn't want to be part of it. He thinks the NHL needs to speak publicly on the issue and not "bury its head in the sand."

The NHL's initial statement after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 said, "We also remain concerned about the well-being of the players from Russia, who play in the NHL on behalf of their NHL Clubs, and not on behalf of Russia. We understand they and their families are being placed in an extremely difficult position."

The fact the NHL has not changed its position since that statement is disappointing to Hašek.

Russia's war in Ukraine will likely become a more prominent NHL storyline as [Alex Ovechkin](#) chases Wayne Gretzky's goal record. Ovechkin still has a photo with Putin as his Instagram profile picture and has not made any strong statements against the war. He hasn't spoken about the war since 2022.

"I'm Russian, right?" Ovechkin said in 2022. "Something I can't control. It's not in my hands. I hope (the war)'s going to end soon. I hope it's going to be peace in both countries. I don't control this one."

Hašek said he believes only Russians who condemn the war should be allowed to play in the NHL. However, he understands the difficult position Russian players are in. Hašek lives in a free country and is not an employee of the NHL, which he says gives him the freedom to speak his mind. It is more difficult for those who fear for their safety or their family's safety, Hašek added. Or even those who could face job loss or other economic repercussions based on their words.

Hašek does not place the blame on the individual Russian players for not speaking out.

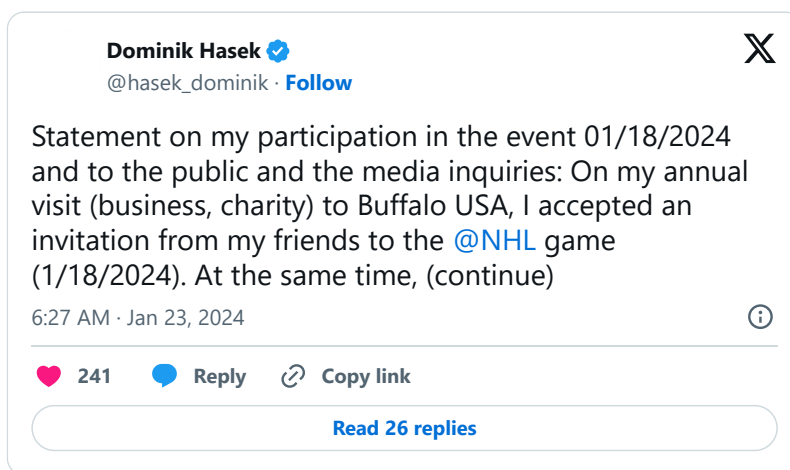
"Rules need to be set so that Russian players have an incentive to come out publicly," Hašek said. "Some players could make the best peace ambassadors. Unfortunately, the NHL does not help the Russian hockey players one bit."

The New York Rangers' Russian star [Artemi Panarin](#) has been outspoken against Putin in the past. Hašek also cited [Boston Bruins](#) defenseman [Nikita Zadorov](#), a Russian who spoke out against the war when he was a member of the [Calgary Flames](#) in 2023. He posted "No War" on his Instagram account with the caption "Stop it!!!" He also did a two-hour interview with [Russian journalist Yury Dud on YouTube](#) in which he explained his opposition to the war. Hašek felt the NHL didn't offer him enough support.

"It must be said that this is a topic that people are very afraid to talk about publicly," Hašek said. "In the Czech Republic, there is great fear of Russia, which our parliament has designated as a terrorist state. With Russia, we have experience in this direction and, unfortunately, also victims. People don't know how the situation will develop and if Ukraine falls, we are one of the other possible victims."

Hašek said he would like to hear more ex-players speak out on the topic, because they are no longer dependent on the NHL for work. He knows these aren't easy situations to navigate. He admitted to what he now views as a mistake of his own last year.

Last season, Hašek came to Buffalo as part of an annual visit to do charity work with his foundation, Hašek's Heroes. While in town, he went to a Sabres game and participated in the start of the game by banging the drum to excite the crowd. He still loves Buffalo and considers it one of the best hockey towns in the United States. But he realized that even participating in that way went against what he had spoken about. Days later, he apologized on X.



“I consider my participation in the match and its opening as my huge mistake,” Hašek wrote. “Hereby, I want to apologize to all Ukrainian soldiers and all Ukrainian people who are heroically defending not only their homeland, but also the whole of Europe against the imperialist enemy. And further to the fans who supported me and continue to support me and to everyone whom I disappointed with my act. I find this personal failure of mine very difficult to excuse. I will try even harder to fix it. At this moment, I can promise you that a similar situation will not happen again. And that I will fight to the maximum and help defend everything that the Russian state-controlled terrorist regime attacks. And criticize all those who support it with their actions.”

Last week, Hašek did meet with [Sabres coach](#) Lindy Ruff and a few others he knows from his time in Buffalo. He also met with the video team for the Sabres’ website to help them with a project they are doing on his upbringing.

“I have no interest in breaking ties,” Hašek said. “I am interested in helping the NHL as much as possible with my behavior, and nothing is changing about that. Otherwise, of course, I will not participate in any of the two matches, nor anything related to the start of this year’s NHL. The reason is clear. I don’t want to be part of an event that is an advertisement for the Russian war.”

(Photo: Petr David Josek / AP Photo)

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